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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 000909

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/ANP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/31/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [NZ](#)

SUBJECT: NEW ZEALAND'S NEW MAORI PARTY GAINS TRACTION

REF: A. WELLINGTON 889

[B](#). WELLINGTON 601

[C](#). WELLINGTON 382

Classified By: Principal Officer, Siria Lopez, Reason 1.5 (b) and (d)

(U) This cable originated from AmConGen Auckland.

[1](#). (U) Summary: Approximately four months after its creation, the Maori Party has achieved more success than some observers may have initially expected, due largely to anger in Maori communities over the GoNZ's handling of proposed foreshore and seabed legislation. For now, Labour seems to have an unexpected rival for the important Maori vote, which controls the outcome of seven Maori-designated Parliamentary seats. Nonetheless, the Maori Party faces many serious longer-term challenges, including voter apathy, institutional support, funding and a strong Maori tradition of voting for Labour. These challenges must overcome if it is to avoid becoming just one more failed Maori party experiment in New Zealand. End Summary.

[2](#). (U) Approximately four months after its creation, signs are that the Maori Party may not be the insignificant blip some observers may have initially expected. (Most prominently, Labour MP John Tamihere, a high-profile Maori, vented against the Party, accusing it of being nothing more than a brand name-- barbs that greatly aggravated Maori Party leaders.) But it is not surprising that the Maori Party's birth has been greeted with caution or outright skepticism. Notwithstanding Maori disaffection, previous attempts at establishing Maori-based political parties in New Zealand have not been very successful. The three other Maori-based political parties currently officially registered are electorally insignificant or barely perceptible. Maori voters, traditionally, prefer to give their support to the Labour Party.

MMP) WHY MAORI VOTES MATTER

[3](#). (SBU) Under New Zealand's system of mixed-member proportional voting, each voter has two votes) one for an electorate candidate, and one for a party. In addition, Maori can choose to vote either on the general roll, or on the Maori electoral roll, which votes on the seven constituencies specially designated for Maori. The Maori Party will focus on these Maori electorate seats first. However, provided the Party retains Maori Party Co-Chairman Tariana Turia's seat, it will receive additional list (i.e. Party) member seats in Parliament in relation to the proportion of the vote) i.e. at current polling of two percent, the Maori Party could gain one or two additional seats. Current polling for the 2005 election leaves neither major party with a clear majority, meaning that the presence of sympathetic coalition partners will be the deciding factor for any government. The Maori Party is likely to vote closely with Labour on supply and confidence issues, and should the Maori Party win additional Maori seats and gain list seats, it will amplify their influence as a possible coalition partner.

CURRENT PARTY STANDING

[4](#). (U) What could make this latest attempt at establishing a Maori-based party different from past attempts is Maori anger over the seabed and foreshore issue (ref C). At the end of April, Labour MP Tariana Turia bolted the party to protest the Labour Government's perceived reversal on the foreshore and seabed legislation. (Proposed legislation grants Maori customary title versus full ownership, and has been called by some a modern-day land grab.) In July Turia stood in a by-election as a Maori Party candidate and won, giving the new party parliamentary representation (ref A). Party membership now reportedly stands at 6000. Recent polls have it enjoying 2 per cent national support (translating into 2 non-Maori seats if an election were held this month) and five percent support in Auckland where many of New Zealand's Maori live. The Party may also have a decent shot at another Parliamentary slot if Tamihere, currently enmeshed in a financial scandal, is forced into a by-election to retain his Parliamentary seat (ref A.) If so, it is expected

that his Maori Party opponent, Dr. Pita Sharples, would give him a good run for his money.

15. (C) If Maori disaffection over the foreshore and seabed can be sustained and if Maori are prepared to channel these negative feelings into positive support for their own political vehicle, then the Party is likely to increase its Parliamentary representation in the next general election. If the party can find good candidates, many already believe it is capable of taking all seven Parliamentary seats currently reserved for Maori. Dr. Sharples, Maori Party co-leader, confirmed to Consul General that candidate selection is the Party's number one priority. The Party is seeking out prominent persons, such as Maori Land Court Judge Caron Wickliffe, to offer them the opportunity to run as Party candidates (Note: Judge Wickliffe declined Sharples' offer, however.)
LONG-TERM PROSPECTS?

16. (C) Despite the initial traction the Maori Party has gained, there are some very daunting challenges to its longer-term viability. Two obvious problems are funding and institutional support. Maori are a minority population and their income levels are lower than those of non-Maori. Already an early Maori Party fund-raiser planned for the South Island had to be canceled due to lack of response. Asked about the South Island, Dr Sharples sighed and told Consul General it was "a mess." The South Island Maori electorate, he noted, comprises Wellington with its Maori urban middle-class and the entire South Island with its non-urban, non-middle-class Maori. The Party has found it difficult to establish branches there because of disparate constituencies, spread-out population and the lack of organizational discipline among Maori Party members. (NB: The Maori seat boundaries are split to cover the entire country. The South Island is home to only 10 percent of the Maori population.)

17. (U) Maori political apathy is another significant challenge. Maori feel less stake in the political process and have lower levels of political participation than other groups. At a political meeting on local elections in Manukau City, the city with the largest Maori population in New Zealand, Maori Party speakers noted that Manukau has the lowest vote turnout for local government elections in the country. Voter turnout among Maori and Pacific Islanders, they said, was even lower.

18. (U) Ultimately, however, the Maori Party's biggest challenge may be the Labour Party. When Maori do vote they have traditionally voted for Labour. Maori have long identified Labour as the party most sympathetic to their concerns. Notwithstanding Maori feelings of betrayal over Labour's position on the foreshore and seabed legislation, they believe Labour still better represents their overall interests than does, for example, the National Party. Those more practical and realistic Maori question the value of giving the Maori Party their vote when, as one Maori academic put it, "the Governor General won't be asking them to form the next government."

19. (C) Dr. Sharples told Consul General that in order to address this problem, a Maori Party priority is to register those Maori who have never registered to vote before. He explained that most of these are young persons who do not have a long history of supporting Labour. Thus, they should be more easily persuaded to vote for the Maori Party. Sharples seemed acutely aware of the difficulty in coming up against the powerful Labour Party election machine. He said he hopes Tamihere runs without Labour party backing if a by-election should come to pass in Tamihere's electorate. Under these circumstances, Sharples is confident he could wrest the seat from Tamihere. Otherwise, "John may eat me up and spit me out." "But," he added, "at least he'll get a battle."

110. (C) Asked if the Maori Party plans to run candidates in non-reserved seats in the 2005 general elections, Sharples said yes but these are simply "ideas at this stage." He indicated that the Party wants to focus on registering voters for Maori electorates, where it has its best electoral prospects. But the Party would consider running in those general constituencies with large Maori populations.

COMMENT

111. (C) Comment: In addition to the challenges to Maori Party viability that are noted above, other potential pitfalls include pressure from Maori extremist elements (held at bay for now according to Sharples) and divisions along tribal lines (a greater worry). Nonetheless, notwithstanding some well-justified doubts, the Maori Party has done respectably in a very short time. It has also put Labour on notice that it may now have a rival for the Maori vote, a

vote that is fundamentally important to Labour and one that has been long taken for granted. So the Maori Party appears to have gotten off to a good start. Now it must establish its significance and staying power as a rival to Labour for the Maori vote.

Swindells